

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN
CHAIRMAN, SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING
ON AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL DELAYS
SEPTEMBER 14, 2000

- C At one time, our nation had what was considered the largest, most efficient aviation system in the world. Today, our aviation system has reached the almost untenable position of gridlock predicted by the National Civil Aviation Review Commission in 1997. As a recent Washington Post editorial pointed out, people are no longer scared of flying--they're scared of not being able to fly.
- C According to the FAA, there has been a 58 percent increase in flight delays over the last 5 years. Last year, flight delays were up 22 percent over the prior year. And unfortunately, the FAA has reported a 12 percent increase in flight delays over the first 6 months of this year compared to the first 6 months of 1999. We don't really even need these numbers. You only need to go to an airport or pick up the newspaper and read the horror stories of middle-America stranded in various airports around the country. As USA TODAY noted in one of its headlines, "Frustrated Flyers Now Expect Delays."
- C While flyers may come to expect these delays, no one seems to want to bear responsibility for them. It's clear that each segment of the aviation community bears some responsibility for these problems.
- C The fact is the airlines tend to schedule their flights at the same time during peak periods, and often at levels that they know are greater than an airport can handle. A recent DOT Inspector General audit on flight delays pointed out that for one day in January, Newark Airport's scheduled arrivals exceeded the airport's capacity to handle them during four peak hours.
- C This year, more than ever, airline employees have caused enormous delays. Recently, the pilots at United have undertaken work stoppages to satisfy their personal greed. Last year, pilots at American engaged in similar tactics. And who bears the brunt of the stoppages? Middle-America. Average Americans plan for months to take a vacation, only to be greeted at the airport by cancelled flights and lost vacations due to pilot greed. These are people who can't afford to change their plans at the last minute and don't take flights that can be billed to a client.
- C In 1998, per capita income in the U.S. was \$20,120. USA TODAY reported that the top pilots at United will make almost \$342,000 per year in 2004 if the latest contract is ratified, or \$355.84 per hour.

- C And you know what saddens me the most? A large number of these pilots are former military whose code is supposed to be “duty, honor, country.” Now they take actions without a thought for the Americans that rely upon them to ferry their families across the country for a family vacation, attend a wedding, or be at the side of a sick relative.
- C I also recognize that one of the most significant problems is the explosion in air travel. The airlines now carry nearly 3 times as many passengers as they did when the industry was deregulated in 1978, and air fares are 40 percent lower when adjusted for inflation. Air traffic control has not kept up with this exponential rise in passenger traffic.
- C But this has not been an unexpected development. In 1993, the Baliles Commission Report stated that “[f]or too long, too many people . . . have been spending too much of their time sitting on the ground in airplanes and not enough time flying in them.” The Commission called for further development of the Global Positioning System (GPS) and its expedient application to the air traffic control system. In 1997, the White House Commission also advocated the utilization of GPS and the advent of modernization as early as possible.
- C The FAA’s modernization program was originally intended to be finished in 1993 at a cost of \$12.6 billion. Modernization is currently not scheduled to be finished until 2012 at a cost of more than double that. The FAA’s GPS-based system, the Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS), has been significantly scaled back, is over budget, and is not scheduled for implementation until the end of 2002 at the earliest. These delays must be rectified and we must give much greater focus to modernization of the air traffic control system.
- C It is also clear to me that we need to pour new concrete and expand our capacity on the ground in order to handle the increasing number of flights. We are predicted to reach 1 billion air travelers in less than 10 years. According to the Department of Transportation Inspector General, in the last 5 years, only 3 new runways were put into service at our 28 largest airports. Unfortunately, some of the very passengers that are complaining about delays are going to have to get rid of the “not in my backyard” mentality and allow new or expanded airports to be built.
- C As I have outlined here, I don’t believe that there is one particular solution to this problem. However, I do believe that we must keep the pressure on and remain vigilant in our efforts to meet this ever increasing demand and make our aviation system more efficient for the American people.
- C I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.